U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge
1710 360th Street
Titonka, IA 50480

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 25, 2016

Contact:
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Union Slough Compatibility Determinations

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge, is initiating a determination of compatibility for public use and economic uses that may be allowed on the Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge, Kossuth County, Iowa. Compatibility determination is a process by which the agency ascertains whether or not a refuge use materially interferes with, or detracts from the purposes for which it was established. Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order 7976, dated September 19, 1938. Additional lands have subsequently been acquired under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929, (16 U.S.C. 715-715r), and the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee). The stated refuge purposes are: "as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife…" and "… for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purposes, for migratory birds."

The uses being reviewed are Hay Harvest, Hunting, Prescribed Livestock Grazing, and Cooperative Farming as a habitat management tool to enhance and restore refuge grasslands.

Copies of the draft compatibility determinations may be obtained from or reviewed at the refuge headquarters. Copies have also been posted on the refuge website http://www.fws.gov/refuge/union_slough/. The public is encouraged to participate in the determination of the compatibility of this undertaking by sending written comments to Union Slough NWR, 1710 360th St., Titonka, Iowa 50480. All comments received will be taken under consideration. The deadline for comments is Close of Business, June 7, 2016. For more information, contact Ed Meendering at 515-928-2523 ext 11.

Visit the Refuge website at http://www.fws.gov/refuge/union_slough/.

For more information on the Midwest Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service visit http://midwest.fws.gov.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfwmidwest, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwsmidwest, watch our YouTube Channel at http://www.youtube.com/usfws and download photos from our Flickr page at http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwsmidwest.

Compatibility Determination

Use: Cooperative Farming as a habitat management tool to enhance and restore refuge grasslands

Refuge Name: Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order 7976, dated September 19, 1938. Additional lands have subsequently been acquired under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 (16 USC 715-715r) and the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 USC 668dd-668ee).

Refuge Purposes:

"...as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife:..." Executive Order 7976, dated September 14, 1938

"...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds." 16 U.S.C. § 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

"...conservation, management, and ... restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats... for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans..." 16 U.S.C. § 668dd(a)(2) (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act)

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

The mission of the Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Description of Use:

What is the use?

Cooperative farming is the term used for cropping activities done by a third party on land that is owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). This type of activity is usually done on a short-term basis (3 years or less) to prepare an optimum seed bed for the establishment of native prairie species.

The cropping is done under the terms and conditions of a Special Use Permit issued by the Refuge Manager. The terms of the Permit insure that all current Service restrictions are followed. Permittee selection and associated determination of cost will follow relevant Refuge Manual guidance (5 RM 17 and 6 RM 9.11) and Region 3 specific guidance for farming.

Cooperative farming activities are only compatible on previously disturbed areas that have unacceptable levels of chemical residue, noxious weeds, or non-native plant species or ecotypes. Although the specific acreage of fields to be farmed would vary by unit, they would typically range from 5 to 40 acres. Only a very small percentage of the total Refuge acres would be farmed at any given time.

Is the use a proposed new use or an existing use?
Existing use.

Is the use a priority public use?
No.

Where would the use be conducted?
Habitat units of Union Slough NWR.

When would the use be conducted?
Cooperative farming would generally begin in late April and continue into early November. Activities would be carried out during all times of the day.

How would the use be conducted?
Farming entails the use of mechanical equipment such as tractors, disks, and seeders. Each site is tilled prior to spring planting. Tilling requires 1-2 days per site. Some sites may also be treated with herbicide prior to planting. Crops such as corn and soybeans are planted. Typically, planting is completed in one day or less on any individual site and planting on all sites usually begins as early as mid-April and is completed as early June depending on soil conditions and type of crop planted. Cooperators are limited to using only FWS approved herbicides. The use of Genetically Modified Crops (GMO crops), specifically Glyphosate-tolerant corn and soybeans, will be authorized on refuge lands consistent with current Regional Policy. The use of genetically-modified, glyphosate-tolerant corn and soybeans will be used only for the purpose of habitat restoration. No neonicotinoid treated seeds will be allowed on the Refuge.

Why is this use being proposed?
Cooperative farming on the Refuge would be to provide an optimum seed bed for the establishment of native prairie species for the benefit of waterfowl and other migratory birds. A clean, well prepared seed bed would help insure the success of these prairie plantings. For this reason, cooperative farming is being proposed by the Service.

Availability of Resources:

What resources are needed to properly and safely administer use?
The needed staff time for the development and administration of a cooperative farming program is already committed and available. Most of the needed work to prepare for this use would be done as part of routine grassland management duties. The additional time needed to coordinate issuance and oversight of the needed Special Use Permit is relatively minor and within existing Refuge resources.

Are existing refuge resources adequate to properly and safely administer the use?
Yes.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

How does the use affect the refuge purposes, the Refuge System mission, and refuge goals and/or objectives?
Cooperative farming to prepare suitable seed beds for native prairie plantings will result in short-term disturbances and long-term benefits to both resident and migratory wildlife using Refuge

uplands. Short-term impacts will include disturbance and displacement typical of any noisy heavy equipment operations. Cropping activities on previously disturbed areas will also result in short-term loss of habitat for any animal or insect species using those areas for nesting, feeding, or perching. Long-term benefits are extremely positive due to establishment of diverse nesting cover including native tallgrass species. The resulting habitat will greatly improve conditions for most of the same species affected by the short-term negative impacts. Strict time constraints placed on this use will limit anticipated impacts to these relatively minor areas.

Public Review and Comment:
The period of public review and comment began 5-25-2016 and ended 6-7-2016.
The following methods were used to solicit public review and comment:

Posted notice at refuge headquarters.

Public notice in newspaper with wide local distribution.

Media used to solicit public review and comment included the following newspapers:
Algona Upper DesMoines, The Titonka Topic and The Bancroft Register.

Determination:

_____ Use is Not Compatible

__X__ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. Cooperative farming agreements will be limited to 3 years or less.
2. Farming activity will only take place on previously disturbed areas that have unacceptable levels of chemical residue, noxious weeds, or non-native plant species or ecotypes and contribute to the purposes of the Refuge.
3. Cooperating farmers will be subject to Service policy and regulations regarding use of chemicals. Herbicide and pesticide use is restricted by type and to the minimum necessary amount applied.
4. Special conditions of Special Use Permits will address unique local conditions as applicable.
5. Planting and harvest activities are restricted to minimize disturbance of wildlife species.
6. The use of GMO crops is limited to Glyphosate-tolerant corn and soybeans.
7. The use of genetically-modified, glyphosate-tolerant corn and soybeans will be used only for the purpose of habitat restoration.
8. No neonicotinoid treated seeds will be allowed on the Refuge.

Justification:
The cooperative farming of previously disturbed areas on Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge (USNWR) with unacceptable levels of chemical residue, noxious weeds, or non-native plant species or ecotypes to prepare an optimum seed bed for the establishment of native prairie species, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of USNWR for the following reasons.

1) Only areas that have already been significantly manipulated or altered by cropping activities will be affected. These areas contain few if any native plants and offer extremely limited value to the ecological integrity of the unit or landscape.

2) Cooperative farming activities in most cases, provide the fastest, most cost effective way to establish native prairie species on areas that have unacceptable levels of chemical residue, noxious weeds, or non-native plant species or ecotypes. Refuge staff could complete all work, but that would require additional equipment and staff to efficiently break up non-native brome sod, or to cultivate and control weeds on small tracts of land. Hiring contractors to do this work at rates that can approach $100/acre is a possibility, but would require additional funds in years when the farming acres were high. By using local farmers to conduct these farming activities, Refuge budgets and staff time can be better allocated to completing the needed restoration (seeding of native grasses and forbs) on lands that have completed the farming cycle and are in good condition for seeding.

3) Short-term impacts of farming small tracts of land are minor. Low quality grasslands that are farmed as a first step to conversion to higher-value native grasslands will result in habitat loss for trust resources during the farming period. The long-term benefits to the ecological integrity of the Refuge by restoring these degraded areas to native prairie plant species are significant and exceed the short-term losses incurred through the cropping process.

Signature: Refuge Manager _____ / / /
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief _____ / / /
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-evaluation Date: _____

Compatibility Determination

Use: Hay Harvest

Refuge Name: Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order 7976, dated September 19, 1938. Additional lands have subsequently been acquired under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 (16 USC 715-715r) and the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 USC 668dd-668ee).

Refuge Purposes:

"...as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife:..." Executive Order 7976, dated September 14, 1938

"...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds." 16 U.S.C. § 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

"...conservation, management, and ... restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats... for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans..." 16 U.S.C. § 668dd(a)(2) (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act)

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

The mission of the Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Description of Use:

What is the use?
The cutting and removal, by baling and transport to an off-refuge location, of grasses and forbs, either non-native cool season species such as brome or native warm or cool season species. This use is typically completed by a cooperative farmer under authority of a special use permit issued by the Refuge manager.

Is the use a proposed new use or an existing use?
Existing use.

Is the use a priority public use?
No.

Where would the use be conducted?
Habitat units of Union Slough NWR.

When would the use be conducted?
Haying will typically be initiated after August 1 to minimize disturbance to nesting birds, unless an earlier initiation date is documented by a specific management objective in a station plan or a

written justification by the project leader. Haying will be delayed as late as possible to minimize negative effects to wildlife.

How would the use be conducted?
Haying can be an effective management tool as part of an overall grassland management plan to improve and maintain grasslands for the benefit of migratory birds. Grasslands need periodic renovation to maintain vigor, diversity, and the structure necessary for migratory bird use. Haying is an effective alternative to burning or grazing, which are the two other primary means used to maintain grassland vigor. If local site conditions preclude use of prescribed fire due to hazards to neighboring property or a similar challenge, removal of accumulated biomass through haying would reduce unwanted over-story cover and encroaching woody vegetation. This would allow for more vigorous regrowth of desirable species following the haying, although results are neither as dramatic nor as positive as with the use of prescribed fire.

Strategies outlined in the Refuge Habitat Management Plan outline maintaining vigor in uplands, and providing structural diversity for migratory birds, by using haying, grazing and prescribed burning as a treatment, on each unit, at least once every four years.

Haying of a nonnative cool season field is an effective preparation tool used prior to spraying the field with herbicide to kill all existing vegetation. Removal of the heavy grass over-story through haying allows the chemical to be more effective at treating the target plants. Thorough removal of the unwanted grasses ensures greater success of the planted native grasses for both inter-seeding or plowing the soil prior to seeding. Finally, haying can be used to establish firebreaks that facilitate safe prescribed fire. Strategically placed grass strips are hayed in early fall, so the vegetation green-ups earlier in the spring with no dead over-story biomass. This green up allows for effective prescribed fire breaks.

A goal of 30-50% of similar habitat type in the management unit or adjacent areas will be left un-hayed when feasible to serve as refugia for pollinators and other wildlife. Refugia locations will be planned taking foraging flight ranges of pollinators into consideration.

No single area will be hayed more than once per year to allow time and space for pollinator populations to recover unless there's a specific management objective identified in a station plan or a written justification by the project leader.

Why is this use being proposed?
Used as a habitat management tool haying will introduce habitat disturbance necessary to promote ideal conditions for many grassland nesting migratory birds including waterfowl. Also this use is outlined as a strategy in the Refuge Habitat Management Plan to promote vigor and structural diversity for migratory birds.

Availability of Resources:

What resources are needed to properly and safely administer use?
Planning for this use would not require any additional resources and would be a normal part of grassland management. Staff time will be need to complete the hay bid process, develop public notices, and issue special use permits and bills for collection.

Are existing refuge resources adequate to properly and safely administer the use?
Yes.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

How does the use affect the refuge purposes, the Refuge System mission, and refuge goals and/or objectives?
Haying will result in short-term disturbances and long-term benefits to both resident and migratory wildlife that use the refuge. Short-term impacts will include disturbance and displacement typical of any noisy heavy equipment operation. Cutting and removal of standing grasses will also result in short-term loss of habitat for those species requiring tall grasses for feeding and perching (i.e., Bobolink and Dickcissel). However other migratory birds like: upland sandpiper, meadowlarks, and pectoral sandpipers benefit from the resulting low vegetation height. Long-term benefits will result as increased vigor of regrown grasses and establishment of highly desirable native tallgrass species improves conditions for those same species affected by the short-term negative impacts. Longer-term negative impacts may occur to resident wildlife species such as pheasant that would lose overwintering habitat in the hayed areas. However, strict time constraints placed on this use will limit anticipated impacts to these relatively minor areas.

Public Review and Comment:
The period of public review and comment began 5-25-2016 and ended 6-7-2016.
The following methods were used to solicit public review and comment:

Posted notice at refuge headquarters.

Public notice in newspaper with wide local distribution.

Media used to solicit public review and comment included the following newspapers:
Algona Upper DesMoines, The Titonka Topic and The Bancroft Register.

Determination:

_____ Use is Not Compatible

__X__ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. Haying must meet specific habitat and related wildlife objectives and contribute to the purposes of the Refuge.
2. Haying will typically be initiated after August 1 to minimize disturbance to nesting birds, unless an earlier initiation date is documented by a specific management objective in a station plan or a written justification by the project leader. Haying will be delayed as late as possible to minimize negative effects to wildlife.
3. A goal of 30-50% of similar habitat type in the management unit or adjacent areas should be left unhayed when feasible to serve as refugia for pollinators and other wildlife. Refugia locations should be planned taking foraging flight ranges of pollinators into consideration.

4. No single area should be hayed more than once per year to allow time and space for pollinator populations to recover unless there's a specific management objective identified in a station plan or written justification by the project leader.
5. Bales must be removed from the refuge units timely and as required in the permit.
6. All equipment for haying, including ATV's and UTV's, must be clean and free of invasive species plant material, including seeds, before entering an Refuge property. The Refuge manager may inspect and deny the use of any equipment/vehicle/horse that appears to contain invasive species plant material.

Justification:

Haying will not materially interfere with waterfowl/ migratory bird breeding and nesting if completed within the necessary stipulations. Use of haying, as a management tool can be a valuable technique for providing long-term habitat improvements to grassland that otherwise, would degrade through natural succession or dominance of non-native plants. Without this tool, the areas would suffer encroachment of undesirable woody species such as box elder or ash or would remain in unwanted non-native cool season grasses such as brome. Use of the areas by waterfowl or grassland-dependent species such as Bobolink, Dickcissel, or Grasshopper Sparrow would slowly decline in the absence of haying or other similar management. Strategies in the Refuge Habitat Management Plan suggest the use of haying, grazing and burning be uses as a management tool to increase grassland vigor and structure for migratory birds. Haying would be used in conjunction with prescribed burning and grazing at least once every four years on each refuge upland unit.

Signature: Refuge Manager _____ / / /
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief _____ / / /
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-evaluation Date: _____

Compatibility Determination

Use: Hunting

Refuge Name: Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge was established by Executive Order 7976, dated September 19, 1938. Additional lands have subsequently been acquired under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 (16 USC 715-715r) and the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 USC 668dd-668ee).

Refuge Purposes:
"...as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife:..." Executive Order 7976, dated September 14, 1938

"...for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds." 16 U.S.C. § 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

"...conservation, management, and ... restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats... for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans..." 16 U.S.C. § 668dd(a)(2) (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act)

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

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Description of Use:

What is the use?
Hunting of game as an activity conducted by the general public under regulation authority of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Hunting is currently allowed for migratory game birds, upland game birds and mammals, and big game in accordance with state seasons and governed by both federal and state regulations. Hunting may be suspended due to unusual or critical conditions affecting land, water, vegetation, or wildlife populations. Hunting will facilitate four other priority public uses: wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation.

Is the use a proposed new use or an existing use?
Existing use.

Is the use a priority public use?
Yes.

Where would the use be conducted?
Schwob Marsh and Buffalo Creek Bottoms units of the refuge will be open to all hunting in accordance with state seasons and governed by both federal and state regulations. Schwob

Marsh is the portion of the refuge that lies north of county road A-40 in Kossuth County, Iowa. Buffalo Creek Bottoms is the portion of the refuge that lies south of 320th St. in Kossuth County, Iowa.

The Core Area of the refuge is closed to migratory game bird hunting. Upland game hunting and big game hunting is allowed in the Core Area during the dates posted at the Refuge Headquarters. The Core Area is the portion of the refuge that lies between county road A-40 and 320th St. in Kossuth County, Iowa.

When would the use be conducted?
The majority of the use occurs in the fall, from mid-September through the end of December. Spring turkey hunting runs from early April to the end of May and is only allowed on Buffalo Creek Bottoms and Schwob Marsh units of the refuge.

How would the use be conducted?
Hunting is conducted according to the regulations of the Union Slough NWR and consistent with regulations of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Please refer to the State of Iowa Hunting Regulations for clothing requirements, definition of approved weapons, bag limits, license requirements, and other important information.

Why is this use being proposed?
Wildlife management tool, priority public use and public request.

Availability of Resources:

What resources are needed to properly and safely administer use?
Refuge staff time is needed to prepare parking sites, install signage, prepare leaflets, and provide information to interested public. These are activities already occurring on the Refuge to support other activities. Law Enforcement needs will be handled through the Zone Federal Wildlife Officer. The Refuge is also assisted by State Conservation Officers during the hunting season.

Are existing refuge resources adequate to properly and safely administer the use?
Yes

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

How does the use affect the refuge purposes, the Refuge System mission, and refuge goals and/or objectives?
This activity is an existing use on the Refuge and has shown no assessable environmental impact to the Refuge, its habitats, or wildlife species; but the activity is monitored closely for any signs of change. Hunting does cause mortality and disturbance to those species hunted, but bag limits, season dates, and other regulations are set to protect the long-term health of populations.

Public Review and Comment:
The period of public review and comment began 5-25-2016 and ended 6-7-2016.
The following methods were used to solicit public review and comment:

Posted notice at refuge headquarters.

Public notice in newspaper with wide local distribution.

Media used to solicit public review and comment included the following newspapers: Algona Upper DesMoines, The Titonka Topic and The Bancroft Register.

Determination:

_____ Use is Not Compatible

__X__ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. This use must be conducted in accordance with state and federal regulations and Special Refuge regulations published in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR).
2. Dogs may be used for hunting provided the dogs remain under the immediate control of the hunter at all times.
3. All-Terrain Vehicles, snowmobiles, etc. are prohibited at all times.
4. Boats or other floating devises are allowed in units open to migratory bird hunting. Only electric motors are allowed. Air-thrust boats are prohibited.
5. For hunting, you may use or possess only approved non-toxic shot as published in the CFR.
6. Parking, blocking, or in any manner restricting access to roads and gates is prohibited.
7. All personal property must be removed from the Refuge at the end of each day except stands used for deer hunting. See CFR for regulations on deer stands.
8. Annually evaluate hunting methods to ensure safety.
9. Annually review all hunting activities and operations to ensure compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies.
10. Camping, overnight use, and fires are prohibited.

Justification:
This use has been determined compatible provided the above stipulations are implemented. This use is being permitted as it is a priority public use and will not diminish the primary purposes of the Refuge. This use will meet the mission of the Refuge System by providing renewable resources for the benefit of the American public while conserving wildlife and plant resources on these lands.

This activity is an existing use on the Refuge and has shown no assessable environmental impact to the Refuge, its habitats, or wildlife species. It is a valuable tool in controlling deer and small game species on the Refuge that have direct negative impacts to the process of habitat reconstruction and restoration.

Signature: Refuge Manager /_____/ / /
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief /_____/ / /
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-evaluation Date: _____

Compatibility Determination

Use: Prescribed Livestock Grazing

Refuge Name: Union Slough National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

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Refuge Purposes:

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"...conservation, management, and ... restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats... for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans..." 16 U.S.C. § 668dd(a)(2) (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act)

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

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Description of Use:

What is the use?
Limited removal of grass and forb vegetation by domestic livestock, chiefly cattle, but potentially including other domestic livestock to improve grassland vigor and health. Prescribed controlled grazing is recognized as a valuable tool to remove standing vegetation, reduce vegetative litter, and suppress undesirable woody vegetation.

Is the use a proposed new use or an existing use?
Proposed new use.

Is the use a priority public use?
No.

Where would the use be conducted?
Habitat units of Union Slough NWR.

When would the use be conducted?
Grazing may take place anytime from April through November. Most commonly, the grazing will be of high intensity and short-term duration lasting 4 to 8 weeks. Some areas dominated by

warm season grasses may receive lower intensity for a longer period to reduce warm season grasses and promote forbs. There will be three typical seasons of use:

1. Early spring (mid-April to late May) on native prairie or seeded native grasses designed to reduce the vigor of exotic species and increase the vigor of native species.

2. Summer grazing (July 15 to September 1) may be used, especially on non-native grasslands, to stimulate the grassland after the peak nesting season yet allow vegetative regrowth in the fall.

3. Fall grazing (September 1 to October 31) will be designed to have effects similar to spring grazing, mostly on native prairie remnants or fields seeded with native tallgrass prairie species.

How would the use be conducted?
Fencing and control of livestock will be the responsibility of the cooperating livestock producer. Permittees will generally be selected through a bidding process. The Refuge will post a public notice for bids in the local papers (and other sources that may become available) of units available for grazing. Interested bidders may obtain packages at the Refuge Office. Grazing packages will include; season of use, locations, maps delineating the unit, amount of forage available in Animal Unit Months (AUMs), and special requirements such as fence building/maintenance or water hauling. Bidders will bid a price per AUM. If a permittee is not successfully selected using the bidding system as described the Refuge Manager may use the lottery process, and if this is not successful the priority system may be implemented. In certain circumstances the priority system may be used initially for permittee selection, such as in the instance of Partners for Fish and Wildlife Agreements/Grazing plans. Permittees not selected by the bidding process will be billed for actual grazing, utilizing AUMs and the Julian Calendar. The class of and age of livestock used will determine the factor of AUMs, as determined by the USDA Grazing Rates for Cattle by Selected States and Regions. These rates may change and the Refuge must check them annually for updates using USDA as a source.

Why is this use being proposed?
Refuge management tool.

Availability of Resources:

What resources are needed to properly and safely administer use?
Developing grazing agreements and monitoring compliance and biological effects will require some Refuge resources. Most grazing costs, such as fencing, monitoring herd health and so on, are assumed by the permittee. Refuge resources will be used to acquire some unit infrastructure such as boundary fencing and electrical fencing. Some alternative grassland management tools such as prescribed burning, mowing, or haying will be required if grazing is not utilized. Haying has comparable costs to controlled grazing since it also requires administering special use permits. Mowing is more expensive since all costs are assumed by the Refuge. Prescribed burning is an effective grassland management tool, but staff limitations prevent burning as many acres as is desirable each year. In addition, there is an ecological benefit to rotating grassland management techniques and seasons, such as grazing one year and burning another.

Are existing refuge resources adequate to properly and safely administer the use?
Yes

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

How does the use affect the refuge purposes, the Refuge System mission, and refuge goals and/or objectives?
Grazing by domestic livestock has severe short-term effects on grassland communities. Many of these effects are desirable and are designed to maintain and improve healthy grassland communities. Some of these effects include removing standing vegetation, trampling of other vegetation, and reducing populations of pioneering woody plants. Other effects of grazing are more harmful but generally short-lived.

Grazing in the spring can cause direct loss of grassland bird nests due to trampling and loss of standing vegetation. Grazing at any time of year creates an aesthetic issue of concern; seeing public land being grazed by domestic livestock reduces the appeal of the visit for some visitors. Fortunately, controlled grazing is typically of short duration and does not occur annually on any unit. Grazing livestock can create minor direct disturbance of wildlife, but any harm should be negligible. There is a slight potential for conflict between members of the public and livestock or the permittee. All permittees will be advised if the unit is open to the public for hunting or other recreation. There is a very slight risk of injury to the public caused by livestock. Most visitors who are uncomfortable using property containing livestock are likely to select another unit or another time of year for their visit.

Public Review and Comment:
The period of public review and comment began 5-25-2016 and ended 6-7-2016.
The following methods were used to solicit public review and comment:

Posted notice at refuge headquarters.

Public notice in newspaper with wide local distribution.

Media used to solicit public review and comment included the following newspapers:
Algona Upper DesMoines, The Titonka Topic and The Bancroft Register.

Determination:

_____ Use is Not Compatible

__X__ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

1. Grazing must meet specific habitat and related wildlife objectives and contribute to the purposes of the Refuge.
2. Grazing will not occur more frequently than three out of every five years on any individual tract unless there is a specific management objective identified in a station plan or a written justification by the project leader.
3. A goal of 30-50% of similar habitat type in the management unit or adjacent areas should be left un-grazed when feasible.
4. No insecticides, including insecticidal dusting bags, will be used on the Refuge

5. Control and confinement of the livestock will be the responsibility of the permittee.
6. The needs of pollinators and other wildlife will be considered when placing improvements on the landscapes, such as salt/mineral blocks, watering tanks, and holding corals.

Justification:

Prescribed controlled grazing by domestic livestock will not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which the units were established. Limited livestock grazing creates temporary disturbances to vegetation of which many are desirable for grassland management. Grazing produces an undesirable but short-term impact to grassland bird nesting and site aesthetics. Prescribed controlled grazing is an alternative management tool that can be used to replace or complement prescribed burning, mowing, or haying on grasslands. Without occasional disturbance caused by mowing, haying, burning, or grazing, the health of the grassland community will decline, as will the potential for waterfowl production.

Signature: Refuge Manager _____ / / /
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief _____ / / /
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-evaluation Date: _____